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CRIME FICTION AND POLITICS

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Crime fiction is an inherently political genre. In the words of Andrew Pepper, it is "the most politically minded of all the literary genres" because of its focus "on the ways in which individual lives are shaped by the push and pull of larger social, political, and economic forces, […] on the nature and adequacy of the justice system and on the reasons why crimes are committed" (2016: 18). Take Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), for example. While the novel tells the story of a crime that takes place during a dancing contest, the real crime is perhaps the contest itself. McCoy uses this resistance contest in which the winners are the last couple to remain on the dancing floor as a metaphor for the competitive nature of capitalism. Through this contest in which competitors die of exhaustion in a desperate attempt to win the money they need in order to survive, McCoy denounces the ways in which labour, here the dance competition itself, dehumanises individuals, forcing them to compete against each other just to exist.

Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that "images of language are inseparable of various world views and from the living beings who are their agents—people who think, talk, and act in a setting that is historically concrete" (1981: 49). In crime fiction, the world view – that is, the political content – espoused in and through the text emerges through both the genre's content and form (Knight 1980: 5). This chapter explores how political messages manifest themselves both through the content and the form. It begins by analysing the scholarly debates about whether the genre is an inherently conservative form that privileges private property and bourgeois notions of law and order or whether the genre is capable of radical political critique or whether individual novels can espouse both progressive and conservative ideologies at the same time. The chapter then examines some of the ways in which crime fiction responds to the contemporary political fault lines of gender, race, the environment as well as the ongoing consequences of historical injustices. To illustrate the explicit connection between politics and the crime novel, the chapter will analyse Spanish writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Los mares del sur* (1979) [Southern Seas, 1986], which explores class struggle in Barcelona during Spain's momentous transition to democracy following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

The Politics of Form

While critics of the genre are divided over whether it articulates an inherently conservative or progressive worldview, they agree that the genre's ideology is shaped by both the content and the form. Stephen Knight, for example, argues that "differences of form between writers are not trivial or arbitrary; they are essential elements in the meaningful innovations which the story offers to its audience, intimately connected with the differences in content between the texts such as the setting, the crimes discussed, the nature of the detective" (1980: 5). In an early,

influential study Knight argued that the crime genre is in essence conservative: the "major examples of crime fiction not only create an idea (or hope or dream) about controlling crime, but both realise and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy, read and find comfort in a particular vision of crime fiction" (1980: 2). The key concept here is "comforting world-view" (1980: 5), as the resolution to the mystery at the novel's end reassures readers about the provision of justice and thus reinforces the legitimacy of the State that is entrusted with providing justice. Ernest Mandel takes this further, arguing that there is a certain homology between bourgeois society and crime fiction, given its support for, and protection of, the primary capitalist value – that of private property. For Mandel, the whole of bourgeois society is a big mystery in itself and he asks if "bourgeois society [isn't], when all is said and done, a criminal society?" (1984: 72, 135). Franco Moretti pushes the genre even further into the conservative camp, arguing that in its desire for "a *transparent* society", that is to reveal what is hidden, the crime genre serves as the literary articulation of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which – as theorised by Michel Foucault – is a means of effective social control through constant supervision (Moretti, 1983: 143). In contrast to Knight, Mandel and Moretti, others like Sean McCann maintain that the "detective story has always been a liberal genre, centrally concerned with a fundamental premise of liberal theory – the rule of law – and with the tensions fundamental to democratic societies that constantly threw that principle into it" (2000: 6). Howard Haycraft also closely aligns the crime genre with democracy and the rule of law. In his essay "Dictators, Democrats, and Detectives", first written during World War 2, he contrasts the prohibition on the publication of crime stories in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy with the popularity of the genre in England and the United States to argue that "the detective story is and always has been essentially a democratic institution; produced on any large scale only in democracies; dramatizing, under the bright cloak of entertainment, many of the precious rights and privileges that have set the dwellers in constitutional lands apart from those less fortunate" (1974: 313).

The debates about the conservative or liberal nature of the genre are most often associated with, or indeed mapped onto, the different sub-generic categories of classic detective fiction and hardboiled fiction. In historical approaches to the detective novel in terms of its political values, critics often identify a clear division between classic detective fiction and the hardboiled novel, what Julian Symons refers to as "The American Revolution" of the genre (1992: 153-55). That separation is displayed in terms of location, since the American variant acts as a testimony of it with the description of places, products, that also show the reverse of the State, its servants, secretaries, descending from them to the lower classes, which influence the perception of society in the detective journey: "The detective's journey is episodic because of a fragmentary, atomistic nature of the society he moves through" (Jameson 2016: 11). We can talk of tales of realistic violence, set in recognisable surroundings. Symons makes a clear difference between what he calls the detective novel (Holmes, Christie, and so forth) and, in his words, the crime novel (Hammett, Chandler, and others). In terms of social attitude, for Symons, detective fiction is "conservative" while in the crime novel, the social attitude is: "varying, but often radical in the sense of questioning some aspect of law, justice or the way society is run" (203).

Symons and Jameson both clearly adhere to Raymond Chandler's division of the crime novel into two distinct types, as articulated in his 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder". On

the one hand, we have a conservative, rule-bound and "arid formula" of English writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, who were, according to Chandler, only interested in intellectual puzzles (1995: 987). On the other hand, Chandler identified the works of Dashiell Hammett as the epitome of a realistic, politically critical genre that developed in the United States. For Chandler, "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" (998). Chandler in his essay highlights the importance of realist elements in the crime novel and the realism he saw portrayed a corrupt society: "The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities" (991).

The division between conservative classic detective fiction and the more radical hardboiled novel established by Chandler has become a form of critical orthodoxy and it is only recently that critics have begun to question the assumptions that underlie the argument. Andrew Pepper, for example, argues that Arthur Morrison's 1897 story, "The Affair of the Avalanche Bicycle and Tyre Co. Limited", "offers in many ways a more pointed and bleaker assessment of the effects of finance capital than Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930)" (2016: 7), while Stewart King has shown that socio-political elements can appear in all detective novels, even in those traditionally considered to avoid such elements, such as the novels of Agatha. In his study of Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), King draws attention to the ways in which the novel questions the failure of the justice system and articulates the more morally ambiguous worldview usually associated with the hardboiled and, in so doing, King highlights how the strict taxonomy that separates the supposedly apolitical classic detective novel from politically charged hardboiled novel is no longer as clear as it was once perceived to be. It is not just the classic detective novel which can move into progressive territory; the hardboiled can express conservative viewpoints, such as in the novels of American writer, James Ellroy, who considers himself a conservative in ideological terms despite using a form that many associate with a politically charged, progressive message.

Studies like Pepper's and King's form part of a growing body of research that argues for generic complexity. For Lee Horsley, for example, "the genre itself is neither inherently conservative nor radical: rather, it is a form that can be co-opted for a variety of purposes" (2005: 158). Scott McCracken provides a concrete example of how this ideological ambiguity can manifest itself in individual novels, arguing that readers are attracted to crime fiction not because they seek reassuring resolutions to mysteries, but because crime fiction texts often raise "more questions" than they answer through "formal closure" (1998: 50).

The Politics of Content

According to Fredric Jameson the figure of the detective is key, because "through him we are able to see, to know, the society as a whole" (2016: 7). In the case of Chandler and the hardboiled novel, the reader will move, with the detective, through a "kind of microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole: a new centerless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in its own geographical compartment" (6-7). In this case the figure of the detective and the space in which he or she is inserted will produce a particular kind of political reading mostly via the ways in which the detective understands and negotiates social relations and hierarchies and class differences. This process is always fraught and shot through with contradictions. For example, Philip Marlowe's social conservatism means that he finds common ground with the aristocratic and patriarchal General Sternwood

in *The Big Sleep* (1939) even as his distaste of the indolence and moral bankruptcy of the rich produces an equally significant counter reaction.

The political message of the crime novel is not clear precisely because of these tensions and contradictions. Moreover, we might argue that the crime novel's larger social "imaginary" is necessarily limited by the detective's individualism, at least as he is imagined by Chandler, and the fact that he is isolated from society. The function of the detective is to solve the enigma – the crime – and to restore the broken order of things, and in doing so, and whether this is directly acknowledged or not, he or she seeks to restore the social and political equilibrium. Hence, "the crime novel and the figure of the detective are, to some extent, implicated in the hegemonic ambitions of those who have benefited from the unequal distribution of power" (Pepper 2000: 7). Detection is part of the machinery of the State and a mechanism of political control and while the detective and/or the crime novel might be opposed to the values of society as a whole, there is a necessary but uneasy push by both towards the re-establishment of the social order, a move which in turn perpetuates relations of domination and subordination. According to Andrew Pepper "the trajectory of the narrative leads inexorably to a restoration of the status quo and thus, a re-affirmation of the existing social order" (2000: 11). This contradiction dissolves any possibility of utopia, beyond pointing to particular social ills, such as racism, sexism and misogyny, though of course, crime fiction can also collude with and also reproduce these ills too. Still, it is fair to argue that the crime novel, despite these tensions and contradictions, has found ways to expose and confront the problems and abuses of a society organised under capitalism, with its attendant hierarchies and divisions. The genre's critique of society is primarily founded on its capacities to lay bare the violence at the heart of this social organisation and on its political vision which is typically aligned with those on the margins of society; the detective himself or herself, the criminal, the victims or witnesses and suspects. While hardboiled crime writers such as Chandler developed a realistic approach to expose corruption in society, whether it be economic, social or political, the very structures of the crime novel – the crime, investigation, solution/punishment – limit the subversive potential of the genre and put pressure on its utopic claims.

If crime fiction has always been "the most politically-minded of literary genres" this claim has found additional urgency in contemporary era, as the breadth and diversity of the genre's politics has become apparent. Hence it is possible to consider crime fiction's entanglement with the politics of race, gender and sexuality, of post-colonialism and the environment, and of authoritarianism, as this collection as a whole demonstrates. Crime fiction has typically been considered a masculine, male-dominated, genre, in spite of the fundamental contribution from women authors such as Agatha Christie, Patricia Highsmith and Sue Grafton amongst many others. Nevertheless, and according to Stephen Knight, the inherent elasticity and adaptability of the form of the crime novel opens up the possibility of socio-political transformation at the level of content (1980: 5). Female protagonists, such as Christie's Miss Marple, re-invigorated the genre offering a new and different perspective to that typically seen in crime fiction up to this point. Subsequent interventions by writers such as Dorothy B. Hughes showed female characters capable and willing to use their sexuality to further their own ambitions. As Jean M. Lutes puts it, in her study about women-authored crime fiction in the mid-twentieth century: "their most surprising feature may be the way they make women's sexuality a narrative force that moves in multiple and unpredictable ways" (2017: 189). In more

recent years, crime writers such as Val McDermid and Gillian Flynn have incorporated biting social commentaries on the ills of patriarchy and misogyny into their works (while at the same time showing female characters every bit as capable of violence and manipulation as their male counterparts). Other writers have extended these critiques into the gendered implications of human trafficking and domestic violence.

In the case of racial politics, crime fiction in the UK and the US at the end of the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century displayed hegemonic notions of law and or order that legitimated imperialist ideologies centred on white supremacy and excluding foreign and ethnic "others". By the end of the twentieth century the model had evolved and those previously marginalised were given greater voice and visibility in and by the genre and in doing so crime novelists such as Walter Mosley were able to show the effects of implicit and explicit forms of racism previously sanctioned, wittingly or otherwise, by Chandler, Hammett and others. Walter Mosley is an especially interesting figure, not least because of his own complex familial background (he was born in Los Angeles of a Jewish mother of Russian origins and an African-American father (from Louisiana) and because of his willingness to experiment using different generic forms and archetypes (e.g. crime novel, science fiction, Afro-futurism)). Mosley is best known for his series of detective novels featuring Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, an unlicensed investigator with no experience in law enforcement, who has to confront and negotiate the various forms of racism characteristic of post-World War 2 Los Angeles. In doing so, and as we see most explicitly in the opening of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Mosley re-writes the hard-boiled novel, inherited by Chandler, from the perspective of his African-American private detective and demonstrates how the (racial) perspective of the protagonist in turn informs the political assumptions of the genre (e.g. the extent to which racial prejudice is linked to social inequality).

The potential of the crime fiction genre to expose and lay bare different forms of oppression and abuses of power, as well as its capacities to support existing social and political arrangements, is further evidenced by the sheer diversity of the genre's foci and subject matter, whether looking at the effects of decolonisation or the nature and consequences of environmental crimes, especially those perpetuated by governments in conjunction with multi-national corporations. Crime fiction has also engaged with different forms of authoritarianism. As Carlos Uxó demonstrates in his chapter, crime fiction under Stalin was banned because it was considered bourgeois entertainment, full of vices. Nevertheless, later on, a particular form of class-conscious detective emerged to try to root out the ills perpetrated against Communist societies by decadent forms of Western individualism. An interesting case took place in Cuba where the State actively supported the use of art, including crime fiction, as a weapon to safeguard the Revolution. As Uxó demonstrates, Ignacio Cardenas Acuña became a successful author and contributed to the ideological education of workers by showing through his crime fiction what was "legal" for Cuba's revolutionary state. In other parts of Latin America that suffered period of the dictatorships, novelists such as Oswaldo Soriano and Mempo Giardinelli retrospectively used the conventions of the crime novel to criminalise the dictatorial state for its crimes against the citizenry and indict democratic institutions for their failures to punish state-sanctioned criminals and provide historical justice for the victims.

The Politics of Spanish Crime Fiction: *Southern Seas*

The connection between crime fiction and politics can be clearly seen in the case of detective fiction in Spain, where the *novela negra* – the Spanish variant of the hard-boiled – emerged during a time of momentous political change as the country transitioned from an almost 40-year right-wing dictatorship to a modern, liberal democracy following the death of Francisco Franco in 1975. Crime fiction, of course, existed in Spain prior to the re-establishment of democracy (see the essays in Vosburg 2011), but during the years of the dictatorship writers set their novels almost exclusively abroad and employed pseudonyms of English inspiration. This was the case with Francisco González Ledesma, a journalist and writer, who in Francoist Spain penned novels under the name of Silver Kane and only later set his novels in contemporary Spain and wrote them under his own moniker. The dominance of pseudo-transnational novels written by Spaniards during the Franco years was, in fact, the result of political pressure, as the regime was uncomfortable with the negative portrayal of crime in Spanish society, in particular the critique of the justice and policing systems that is present in many hardboiled novels. As such, when writers like Mario Lacruz and Maria-Aurèlia Capmany wanted to write about the dictatorship they set their novels abroad in fictitious or real countries that acted as thinly veiled allegories of Spain. Maria-Aurelia Capmany's *Traduït de l'americà* [Translated from the American, 1959], for example, investigates a mystery primarily in two Albanian cities, the conservative capital Tirana and the progressive coastal city of Valona, each of which acts as a metaphor for Madrid and Barcelona respectively (King and Whitmore 2016).

The need to mask criticism of Spanish society in crime fiction disappeared following Franco's death and the subsequent abolition of censorship. Seeing the opportunities that the genre afforded to critique the profound social, political and economic changes that the country was experiencing, writers turned a rather marginal literary form into the most important genre of Spain's Transition. This was the case of Spain's most famous crime writer and public intellectual, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. A committed communist, anti-Francoist and avant-garde novelist and poet, Vázquez Montalbán largely abandoned the experimental literary forms he had produced in the 1960s to write crime fiction when he realised that the hardboiled format – with which he was familiar more through the films of Humphrey Bogart and John Huston than the works of Hammett or Chandler – offered him a form that was attractive to readers and which would also allow him to communicate to a broader reading public the social and political commentary he wanted to make. The result was the Carvalho series, named after its private detective and gourmand protagonist, Pepe Carvalho, who appears in 18 novels, six short story collections and a recipe book. Scott McCracken maintains that "Popular fiction may use simple forms, but if these forms are to win an audience they must be able to address that audience's concerns" (1998: 11). The popularity of Carvalho series, both in Spain was thanks to Vázquez Montalbán's articulation of his reading public's concerns about the failure of Spain's Transition to realise the transformations that democracy had promised. The sort of politically charged crime fiction combined with local cultural and gastronomic elements that Vázquez Montalbán pioneered not only had an important impact in Spain, it also had a lasting influence on the international development of the genre, particularly among Vázquez Montalbán's fellow Mediterranean writers, Jean-Claude Izzo and Andrea Camilleri, whose protagonists Fabio Montale and Salvo Montalbano are an homage to the author of the Carvalho series.

Patricia Hart has argued that Vázquez Montalbán's "books do not really want to be detective novels. Rather, they want to be commentaries about the problems of living in

contemporary Spain" (86). Yet the two cannot really be separated, as is evident in his 1979 novel, *Los mares del sur* [*Southern Seas*], which was awarded Spain's richest literary prize, the Planeta prize. In the novel, Pepe Carvalho is hired by the widow of a wealthy industrialist to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of her husband, Carlos Stuart Pedrell, who was found stabbed to death in a construction site in a peripheral suburb of Barcelona, after he had abandoned his job and family and supposedly travelled to the southern seas of the novel's title a year earlier in search of spiritual enlightenment. In some ways, Patricia Hart is correct, as Stuart Pedrell's widow is not particularly interested in finding her husband's killer; she is more concerned with making sure that whatever he was doing during his mysterious sabbatical does not compromise the family's business interests which she has taken over successfully since her husband's disappearance. Importantly, the novel draws attention to the importance of politics and political choices through the political slogans, posters and graffiti in the build-up to the 1979 municipal elections that Carvalho encounters as he wanders around the city in search of answers. The convergence of the investigation and contemporary political events is no accident, according to Mario Santana, who argues that it "reveals a polarity between private and public history – a thematic that permeates the whole narrative" (2000: 547).

Carvalho's encounters with a range of characters from different social backgrounds, from the ultra-rich made up of speculative industrialists, eccentric noblemen, and disillusioned daughters of millionaires to the lower classes consisting of prostitutes with a heart of gold, politically committed female unionists, disenchanted, but hopeful communists and misguided knife-carrying thugs, reveals the city's hidden past. In so doing, he reveals the criminality of the ruling class, some of whom made their money through slavery in the early nineteenth century or through dodgy urban development in the 1960s, and their victims, largely the losers of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and those who suffered and continue economic and social exploitation at the hands of Franco's supporters. At the novel's conclusion, Carvalho is able to provide Stuart Pedrell's widow with an account of what her husband had done since his disappearance and, in so doing, identify his murderer, but this crime diminishes in importance, not least because the widow does not want a scandal that could threaten the family's fortune. Indeed, the first crime is only important in so far as it reveals a more damning crime – the enrichment of the upper-class characters through the dodgy construction of a working-class suburb on the city's margins that, in turn, exposes the Franco regime's so-called economic miracle as an illusion. Carvalho's investigation, then, links the city's (and by extension, the nation's) present with its past, calling into question the reluctance of Spain's new democratic class to seek justice for the regime's historical crimes.

Conclusion

At the beginning of *Southern Seas*, Pepe Carvalho tells his assistant that "we private eyes are the barometers of established morality" (7). While initially Carvalho refers to the loosening of Francoist conservative values being terrible for his business, as very few Spaniards are interested in obtaining proof of their spouse's infidelity, by the end of the novel it pointedly refers to the public discourses that shape what can and cannot be discussed, namely the failure of the Transition to make a meaningful break from the Francoist past. Carvalho does nothing to change this. He simply provides his report and pockets his cheque for the investigation. Such

an outcome brings us back to the debate that Horsley identifies "on the question of whether the hard-boiled sub-genre possesses genuinely radical potential or is, in late twentieth century terms, inherently conservative, imposing in the end a resolution that makes the private the instrument of a repressive political order" (2005: 9). What *Southern Seas* shows us is the crime novel's ability to bring any number of political concerns and issues, from transitional justice to environmental crisis, from economic exploitation to domestic violence, to the attention of a crime fiction reading public who may not necessarily be interested in reading about these concerns in non-fictional analyses, such as histories, political tracts, documentaries, etc. Andrew Pepper argues that "Detection is a means of social control as well as social revolution. The detective is opposed to dominant values and yet part of machinery through which those values are affirmed. He or she undercuts […] but also reinscribes relations of domination and subordination" (2000: 7). As we can see in *Southern Seas*, crime fiction's relationship with politics is complex and multi-faceted, challenging readers to take a stance on the contradictions the investigations reveal.

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